

From Call Center to Contact Center:

How to Successfully Blend Phone, Email, Web and Chat to
Deliver Great Service and Slash Costs

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Executive summary

Customers communicate with you in a variety of ways. They call. They send email. They visit your web site. So, naturally, you try to manage each of these communications channels as effectively as possible.

But it has now become critical to manage these channels collectively. That's because customers are bouncing between phone, email and the web with greater fluidity than ever. They send you emails about problems that they've already discussed with you by phone. They visit your web site to double-check information they got from you on the phone. So your company has to be able to communicate across all channels in a common manner.

To be effective, a cross-channel contact center must possess two vital capabilities:

- 1) Common incident tracking, reporting and histories across all channels
- 2) Use of a common knowledge base across all channels

The business impact of this unified approach is substantial. ***Unified contact centers deliver competitively superior service at a dramatically reduced cost.*** That's because each channel becomes more efficient and, over time, more and more customer interactions are driven to the least expensive and most scalable channel: the web.

Multi-channel contact centers also provide companies with clearer insights into their customers' top concerns. These insights are enormously helpful for improving customer care, driving the development of successful products and services, and formulating high-impact marketing strategies.

Fragmented communications, on the other hand, create problems. Service reps get blindsided by calls from frustrated customers. They repeatedly answer redundant questions. They can't easily add new knowledge items to the web site. ***Worst of all, companies with "stovepipe" call centers, email and web self-service communications channels can't adequately understand or address customers' top service issues.***

Fortunately, it's not difficult to make the transition from call center to contact center. Many companies have already done so and are now enjoying the benefits. Their success offers tangible proof that multi-channel contact centers deliver superior service at a substantially lower cost-per-interaction.

Why “Stovepipe” Communication Channels are Bad for Business

People communicate through multiple channels. We talk on the phone. We visit each other. We send each other greeting cards. To get the news, we also use different channels—newspapers, radio, TV, the web—depending on our needs and preferences at the moment. Businesses, too, use a variety of channels to effectively deliver marketing messages to their customers.

Similarly, customers use different channels at different times. They use the phone. They use email. They use the web. They use chat.

Unfortunately, at most companies, these communications channels are separate stovepipes. The phone channel is managed by a call center platform. The email channel is managed with an email management system. The web channel is managed with a content management system. Chat, if provided at all, is managed by a chat system.

Any interaction with a customer on one channel is therefore completely divorced from any other interaction with that same customer on any other channel. When customer service representatives (CSRs) are on the phone with a customer, they have no idea what that customer’s emails looked like. The information that a customer gets in an email may not exactly match the information on the company’s web site. Each channel is isolated from the others—to the detriment of both the company and its customers.

Here are some specific problems that companies and their customers experience every day because of stovepipe communications channels:

The “Didn’t you see my email?” syndrome

A customer with a problem takes the time to carefully describe that problem in an email message. The next day the customer gets a helpful reply. The customer at this point is happy.

But the customer has one little follow-up question and now decides to pick up the phone to get a quick answer. Here’s where things take a turn for the worse. ***The CSR taking the call can’t see the original email exchange.*** So instead of just asking a follow-up question, the customer has to explain the whole situation all over again. In some cases, the information the customer gets from the CSR on the phone may actually contradict what was contained in the original email reply!

Customer impact: Annoyed. Quickly goes from having a high opinion about the company to a lower one.

Company impact: CSR spends 15 minutes on a call that should have taken only three.

The “That’s not what it said on your web site!” syndrome

In this case, the customer’s first attempt to resolve their problem takes place on the company web site. The customer finds some apparently relevant content, but it either doesn’t work or is unclear to the customer. So the customer calls the company for clarification.

The CSR, it turns out, has more up-to-date and accurate information than the web site—and so is able to help the customer effectively. The call just takes a little longer because the customer has already absorbed the older, less helpful information from the site. The customer probably expresses this confusion during the call.

Customer impact: Some confusion and aggravation. Will never fully trust the accuracy of any company web site content again.

Company impact: Will always have to service the customer via costly phone calls rather than the substantially less expensive web channel.

The endless repetitive phone calls syndrome

Companies with conventional stovepipe call centers have great difficulty developing effective self-service content for their web sites.

When call center representatives encounter a new support issue, they have no fast and easy way to capture that issue and publish it as a knowledge item on the web. So instead of answering questions only once on the phone and then having them answered automatically in the future with relevant online knowledge items, stovepipe call centers answer the same questions over and over.

Customer impact: Often can’t find answers to their questions on the web site. Gets into the habit of picking up the phone and calling every time a question arises—even in cases when the information is, in fact, on the web site.

Company impact: Call center inundated with constant repetitive questions that could be answered via the web. Unnecessarily high call center overhead.

These are just a few examples of how typical stovepipe communication channels adversely impact customer service operations. There are many others. The overall negative business impact of these problems can be classified into three areas:

- 1) Individual incidents take much more time and effort to resolve.
- 2) The long-term cost-efficiency of customer service is severely impaired.
- 3) Inconsistent information can be provided by each channel.
- 4) Customers are more frequently annoyed, angered and confused.

Stovepipe channels also deprive companies of insight into the issues that most concern their customers. It's difficult if not impossible to get that insight if you can't look at communications activity across all of your customer service communications channels.

When use of the Internet was minimal, these problems weren't critical. But the number of customers using the Internet continues to grow, and those customers are using email, the web and chat with increasing frequency. ***Their expectations about what you can do for them via these channels is growing as well.*** That's why it's now so dangerous to allow phone, email, and the web to remain artificially separated.

From Call Center to Contact Center

So what does a true multi-channel contact center look like? The first thing to understand is that multi-channel contact centers look a lot like existing call centers. The point of creating a contact center with unified communication channels is not to disrupt current operations or unnecessarily force companies to re-engineer service processes. CSRs still take phone calls. They reply to emails. They escalate calls and emails as required. They launch chats with customers who visit the company web site. And web managers still maintain appropriate controls over site content.



The difference is that, in a multi-channel contact center, these stovepipe processes are unified with each other in order to ensure superlative customer service and optimum operational efficiency. This unification takes place on two levels:

- 1) Common incident tracking, reporting and histories
- 2) Common knowledge base authoring and access

These cross-channel commonalities have proven to be invaluable to both the companies that have implemented them and the customers they serve.

Common incidents

Most companies do a pretty good job of managing call center incidents using conventional trouble-ticket applications. These applications ensure that customers who call more than once about the same incident are handled correctly. They're also useful for monitoring open incidents so that customers don't fall through the cracks.

Email management applications are somewhat less widely deployed. Many companies therefore have no way to track the progress of a customer email through reply and resolution. This lack of accountability tends to result in slow response times and missed commitment.

Even fewer companies use a common system for call center trouble-tickets and email management. This results in problems such as those described in the previous section.

In a multi-channel contact center, on the other hand, all phone, email and chat events are handled by a common system. If customers log in to the self-service area of the company web site, their online information searches can be tracked in this same system as well. So, regardless of which “touch point” a customer uses, every service-related interaction is logged into a single database. The result is one single view of all interactions with a customer in one place regardless of how the customer touched the company.

It sounds so simple and logical that it’s surprising more companies don’t do it. But many companies implemented their call center systems before anyone even heard of email management software. So those legacy systems have tended to remain in place while email, web and/or chat management were added as separate functions.

An effective multi-channel incident management system actually integrates events on three distinct levels: incident tracking, incident reporting and customer incident histories.

Common incident tracking

In a multi-channel contact center, incidents are assigned a common tracking record regardless of how they originate. Each time the customer calls or sends a message about that incident, it is logged into this common record. CSRs therefore have access to all information relating to the incident even if the customer moves between channels.

This ensures that CSRs always have all the information they need to resolve customer issues. ***It also ensures that a trouble ticket opened in one channel doesn’t remain open after it has been successfully closed via another channel.*** Customers and CSRs can thus move freely from channel to channel without jeopardizing the integrity of service processes.

Common incident reporting

Common service records enable companies to document and analyze activity across all channels. This integrated reporting is essential for a wide range of management decisions. For example, a CSR who is very good at resolving phone calls may be slow with emails. Cross-channel reporting quickly highlights this disparity so that it can be addressed. Or, a report may

reveal that customers frequently make phone calls immediately after viewing a specific web knowledge item. This would indicate a content problem requiring management attention.

In fact, by tracking the areas of web content that customers most commonly visit—and tracking the frequency with which they then either launch an email or leave the site with their question answered—***companies have been able to make appropriate adjustments to site content in order to maximize the percentage of customers who find the answers they need on the web without any human intervention at all.*** This significantly reduces costs while providing customers with the information they need on a 24/7 basis.

Cross-channel reports also provide high-value feedback for customer-driven product development, sales, marketing and branding strategies. Data generated across all channels is far richer and more useful than any single channel by itself.

Common customer incident histories

Multi-channel contact centers give companies an integrated view of every customer's service history. This is extremely useful for providing personal service. For example, consider a customer who has always used email to address a chronic set of difficulties over the past two years. One day, that customer picks up the phone to resolve a problem. In a stovepipe call center, the CSR would pop up the customer's service record and see a blank slate—thus leading the CSR to falsely conclude that this is a satisfied, low-maintenance customer. That erroneous assumption could easily lead to big problem early in the call.

In a multi-channel contact center, on the other hand, the CSR would immediately see a long history of often-emotional email messages. With this information, the CSR will do a much better job of handling the present situation appropriately.

Multi-channel customer histories are also much more useful for up-selling and cross-selling than the incomplete histories provided by single-channel systems.

Common knowledge base authoring and access

The other key aspect of multi-channel integration is the use of a common knowledge base. This integration is essential for ensuring

that all service-related information is complete and accurate and that it is used to maximum effect across all channels.

Common knowledge access

In a multi-channel contact center, a common set of knowledge items are used by CSRs for answering questions on the phone, for replying to emails, and for expediting chat sessions—as well as for self-service content on the web. ***This way, the information that customers receive is consistent regardless of how they interact with the company.*** It also means that information only has to be managed and maintained on one place, rather than three or four.

Of course, some of the knowledge items that internal CSRs require may not be appropriate for publication on the web. So there may be some “filtering” of the content specifically used in each channel. But the superset of knowledge items from which all channels draw is a common one.

Use of a common knowledge base brings particular efficiencies to the email channel. Many companies enable customers to email service requests from their web sites using web-based forms. In conventional environments, these emails have to be handled manually. But with an integrated knowledge base, this manual work can be avoided in two ways. First, the form can be “scanned” to determine if any existing knowledge items might answer the question. By directing the customer to those items, the need for a manual reply can be pre-empted. If the customer still sends the email, the CSR may be able to pinpoint an appropriate knowledge item. The CSR can then simply click on that item to send it to the customer—eliminating the time it takes to type a “one-off” response.

Internal use of the knowledge bases by contact center personnel themselves has also proven to be very effective. With such a knowledge base, trainees and/or external contractors can quickly become capable of answering customers’ most common questions. Using the web, the knowledge base can be easily accessed by service staffers working from home or on the road.

Common knowledge authoring

One of the biggest obstacles to the effective use of the web as a self-service channel is the creation of timely, accurate and complete content. Companies can spend weeks trying to get their subject-matter experts to develop appropriate content.

But much of this content is soon out-of-date. At the same time, new information becomes important to customers—but never makes it to the web site.

Multi-channel contact centers directly address this critical knowledge management issue by making the creation of new knowledge items an “organic” component of the service call process. ***When a CSR answers a customer question that doesn't already exist in the knowledge base, they automatically author a new potential knowledge item.*** That item can then be quickly reviewed and/or edited by a content manager who can instantly add it to the knowledge base.

This integrated approach provides two powerful benefits.

- 1) **The time and effort required to create content is cut by 90%.** With the process described above, knowledge items are created as problems are solved. Little or no additional action is required on the part of the CSR. So content creation doesn't become a huge ordeal—which means it actually gets done!
- 2) **Knowledge items are driven by customers' real concerns, not the guesswork of internal content authors.** When you guess what's important to customers, you only have a limited chance of being right. When your content is driven by actual customer queries, you can achieve online self-service rates of 90% and higher. That's because the overwhelming majority of customers' questions revolve around a very narrow set of issues. If your knowledge base consistently addresses those issues, your site will act as an extraordinarily effective self-service channel.

It's important to note that ***superficial integration of stovepipe channel management applications can't provide the full benefits of a true multi-channel contact center.*** Such integration provides only limited channel links: sharing of customer records, the ability to launch one application from within another, etc. This is not the same as having a true common knowledge base and true common incident management. In fact, integration projects often require major effort and expenditure while providing only a fraction of the benefits delivered by a truly unified contact center platform.

Actually, the transition from call center to multi-channel contact center should not be an arduous or disruptive process. On the contrary, it should reduce the aggravation and effort associated with critical tasks such as handling phone calls, replying to email, developing web content and generating reports. By simply removing the walls that have historically separated customer service functions, the multi-channel contact center opens up a world of possibilities for both customer service teams and the business as a whole.

Five Reasons Why Every Company Should Transform Their Call Center into a Multi-Channel Contact Center Today

As attractive as the benefits of a multi-channel contact center are—and as painless as deployment can be—managers still need compelling reasons to move ahead with such an initiative. After all, there are plenty of needs competing for limited corporate resources.

Fortunately, there are at least five compelling reasons why every company should make the transition to a true multi-channel contact center today.

Reason #1: Significantly improved customer satisfaction

Multi-channel contact centers resolve customers' problems faster and provide them with consistent answers regardless of which communication channel they use. That makes them happier. ***This improved customer satisfaction has a direct impact on revenues and profitability.*** Superior service helps you retain customers, which is more profitable than capturing new ones. Superior service also helps you out-sell the competition—especially in markets where there aren't many other competitive differentiators. Superior customer service also means that your company doesn't have to compete on price alone. That premium pricing can have a substantial impact on profitability.

Reason #2: Substantially lower operating costs

Multi-channel contact centers are far less expensive to run than separate customer service stovepipes. Calls get resolved faster because CSRs have more complete information about each customer and each incident. ***At the same time, multi-channel contact centers drive a larger percentage of customer interactions away from the phone towards less expensive channels.*** If customers can get prompt, personalized service via email, they'll have less reason to call. And if you take advantage of the superior knowledge authoring capabilities of the multi-channel contact center, even more customers will find answers to their questions by themselves on the web—where the cost-per-incident approaches zero.

Reason #3: Superior insight into customers' wants and needs

Companies that implement multi-channel customer service know more about their customers than those that don't. They can track on a weekly or even daily basis what customers are asking about by phone, email, the web and chat. They can respond to that information with

better products and more effective marketing campaigns. They can also use that information to further improve service quality and reduce costs. If you can immediately notice that your customers are suddenly asking about something they heard about your company in the news media, for example, you can quickly respond with relevant web content, an email broadcast or advertisements. The sooner you can pick up on any such trend in customer queries, the better.

Reason #4: The market requires it

Even if your business strategy doesn't necessarily call for customer service that's competitively superior, unification of your customer service channels is still a must. ***That's because multi-channel contact centers will soon become the norm in just about every market.*** According to a recent Forrester Research study, 80% of companies have made multi-channel contact centers a strategic priority. As more companies create such contact centers, customer expectations will rise. So you'll need to do it just to keep up. Otherwise, your customers will take their business elsewhere.

Reason #5: It's very do-able

Multi-channel customer service requires some new thinking about how customer communications are managed and how knowledge bases can be most effectively leveraged. But it doesn't require a major IT infrastructure overhaul and it doesn't require exorbitant software licensing fees. ***That's because today's application hosting providers enable you to acquire all the functionality you need for your multi-channel contact center via the Internet.*** Instead of deploying a complex customer service application in your own data center, you can get all the incident management and reporting capabilities you need right on your PCs using nothing more than your web browser. Your hosting service provider manages all the software and underlying server infrastructure for you. You just customize your screens, reports and content to meet your individual business requirements.

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Giga Information Group recently declared: "It is essential that companies communicate across organizational boundaries to develop a plan for supporting their customers across channels with intelligence information that recognizes individual customers and offers consistent levels of support." The time to develop that plan is now. And it's time to implement that plan as well.

About the Author

Greg Gianforte is founder and CEO of RightNow Technologies, the world's leading provider of hosted customer service and support solutions. Greg holds a BE in Electrical Engineering and an MS in Computer Science from Stevens Institute of Technology. He has taught Computer Science at Montana State University as an adjunct professor. Greg co-authored *Reducing the Cost of LAN Ownership and The Business of Running a Network*, published by Von Nostram. Prior to RightNow Technologies, Greg was founder and CEO of Brightwork Development, a LAN Management software pioneer acquired by McAfee (now Network Associates) in 1994.

About RightNow Technologies

RightNow Technologies is a leading provider of on-demand software solutions designed to optimize customer service operations for businesses of all sizes. RightNow's comprehensive customer service solution features a self-learning knowledgebase that is designed to seamlessly support multiple communications channels including web, interactive voice, email, chat, telephone and proactive outbound email communications. RightNow offers its solutions through a multi-tenant, hosted on-demand model to reduce the cost and risk associated with deploying traditional enterprise customer relationship management, or CRM, software. RightNow also provides business process optimization and product tune-ups throughout the lifecycle of its client relationships. Founded in 1997, RightNow is headquartered in Bozeman, Montana, with offices in Europe and Asia. For further information visit www.rightnow.com.

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